Preface to Introduction to Sociology 2e

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About This Book

Welcome to *Introduction to Sociology 5e,* an OpenStax resource created with several goals in mind: accessibility, affordability, customization, and student engagement—all while encouraging learners toward high levels of learning. Instructors and students alike will find that this textbook offers a strong foundation in sociology.

In order to better fit the diverse student body of urban schools, such as The City University of New York (CUNY), this version is the one edited by Hirosuke Hyodo, Ph.D. The license type remains to be CC-BY 4.0, the most accommodating one.

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To the Student

This book is written for you and is based on the teaching and research experience of numerous sociologists. In today's global socially networked world, the topic of sociology is more relevant than ever before. We hope that through this book, you will learn how simple, everyday human actions and interactions can change the world. In this book, you will find applications of sociology concepts that are relevant, current, and balanced.

To the Instructor

This text is intended for a one-semester introductory course. Since current events influence our social perspectives and the field of sociology in general, OpenStax encourages instructors to keep this book fresh by sending in your up-to-date examples to hhyodo@bmcc.cuny.edu so that students and instructors around the country can relate and engage in fruitful discussions.

General Approach

Introduction to Sociology 5e adheres to the scope and sequence of a typical introductory sociology course. In addition to comprehensive coverage of core concepts, foundational scholars, and emerging theories we have incorporated section reviews with engaging questions, discussions that help students apply the sociological imagination, and features that draw learners into the discipline in meaningful ways. Although this text can be modified and reorganized to suit your needs, the standard version is organized so that topics are introduced conceptually, with relevant, everyday experiences.

Features of OpenStax Introduction to Sociology 3e

Modularity

This textbook is organized on Connexions (http://cnx.org) as a collection of modules that can be rearranged and modified to suit the needs of a particular professor or class. That being said, modules often contain references to content in other modules, as most topics in sociology cannot be discussed in isolation.

Section Summaries

Section summaries distill the information in each section for both students and instructors down to key, concise points addressed in the section.

Further Research

This feature helps students further explore the section topic and offers related research topics that could be explored.

Acknowledgements

Introduction to Sociology 5e is based on the work of numerous professors, writers, editors, and reviewers who are able to bring topics to students in the most engaging way.

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Supplements

Accompanying the main text is an [Instructor's PowerPoint](#) file, which includes all of the images and captions found throughout the text and an Instructor's test bank.

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Introduction to Sociology
class="introduction"

Sociologists study how society shapes what we do and how we think, through several important elements, as shown above.
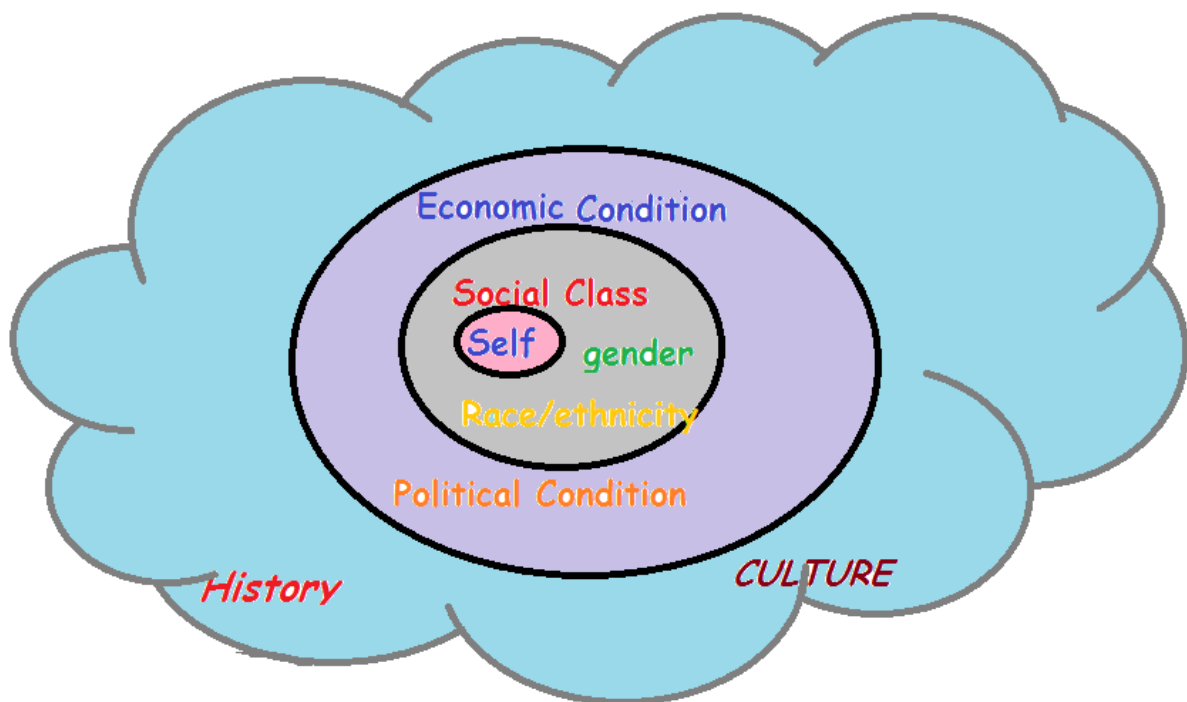
Social Conditions and Social Locations

We all belong to societies, whose size can be as small as a family or as large as a country. Societies vary not just in size but, to be noted, in social conditions in several important ways. They are attached to the society as a whole on the macro level, including economic conditions, political conditions, historical (cultural) conditions, and so on. Such **social conditions** are assumed to shape people's behaviors (or what they do) and attitudes (how they think). For example, those who grew up in democratic environments tend to be more democratic than those who grew up in feudalistic environments. Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, indeed, many Americans supported even slavery. Does anyone of us support it today? No, none of us does; we were born and grew up in way more democratic political conditions.

Not just political conditions, but also think about economic conditions and historical (cultural) conditions, as well, in connection to people's behaviors and attitudes. In such a diverse society as the U.S., for example, people come from different cultures and, thus, act and think in different ways. American sociologist Herbert Gans, indeed, observes differences even between parents (foreign-born) and their own children (native-born). According to him, "Neither will [the native-born children] be willing--or even able--to take low-wage, long-hour "immigrant" jobs, as their parents did (Gans 1992, p. 173). The parents maintain their original cultural conditions while their children tend to be inclined more to the American cultural conditions. Although they share the same DNA, hence, they differ in their behaviors and attitudes.

In addition to social conditions, we all have our own social locations that are attached to each one of us. They include, but are not limited to, social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and, as just shown above, immigrant status. They are also assumed to shape our behaviors and attitudes. Smoking, for example, is a behavior determined by some social locations, such as social class. In the past, smoking was a normative behavior, not associated with social class (Washington Post 2015, Jan. 14). But once the health risks of smoking became widely-known, the better-off began kicking the habit way more successfully than lower-class people. Today, it's considered a class-related behavior. Just like social conditions, hence, **social locations** are also important sociological tools for analyzing people's behaviors and attitudes.

To sum up, it is the social environments (i.e., social conditions and locations) that shape our behaviors and attitudes, and sociologists dismiss any explanations about human behaviors/attitudes based on DNA, instincts, psychic power, or willpower.

"I think therefore I am"? Very good, but don't say that in your sociology class, okay? Why? That's because in this statement, there's no room for social conditions or locations to be taken into account.

What Is Sociology?

- Explain concepts central to sociology
- Understand how different sociological perspectives have developed

Sociology, Society, Culture, and Sociological Imagination

Photo Courtesy pxhere.com< https://pxhere.com/en/photo/329588 >.

Sociology is the scientific study of what people do (behaviors) and how they think (attitudes) referring to their *social conditions* and *social locations*. "Social conditions" vary, as aforementioned, in their types and directions, be they politically democratic or feudalistic, economically rich or poor, socially integrated or segregated, and so forth. "Social locations" include social class (i.e., a combined variable of education, occupation, and income), race/ethnicity, gender, and so forth. Sociologists assume, hence, that such social conditions and locations, or to say "the society," shape our behaviors and attitudes.

Society is an entity that shapes how its members interact with one another with consistently structured sets of rules, be they formal (legal laws) or informal (cultural norms).

Sociologists study all aspects and levels of interactions. The **micro-level** sociology studies social interactions between individuals taking place in

everyday situations, while the **macro-level** sociology looks at trends among, and between, large institutions, be they business, educational, or governmental. For example, micro-level sociologists observe how individuals manage their impressions towards one another in face-to-face encounters. In contrast, macro-level sociologists examine if there are relationships between, say, the nation's economic conditions and the crime rates, or between race/ethnicity and social class.

Culture is a historically developed, yet ever changing, set of rules, know-hows, and tools that support social life and survival both on the individual level and on the group level. Our cultural survival vehicles were built not from coalitions of genes but from coalitions of ideas roped together by cultural evolution (Pagel 2012, p. 46), or of accumulated knowledge through countless generations of our ancestors.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills suggests that in addition to information about, and reason for, what is going on in our society, we need to have "a quality of mind" or **sociological imagination** that enables us to grasp the relations between history (i.e., the process of changing social structures) and biography (a person's behaviors and attitudes) (2000 [1959], pp. 5-6; paraphrased). It can be seen as a discerning method of understanding people in connection to their social conditions and locations.

The Location of Sociology among Other Fields of Studies

Humanities	Social Sciences	Natural Sciences
Literature, Philosophy, Music, Art, Religion...	Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Economics, Political Science...	Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Astronomy, Mathematics...

The Location of "Sociology" among Other Fields of Studies

In order to locate *sociology* among other fields of studies, first, we can categorize all studies into two groups: *humanities* and *sciences*. The fields of **humanities** include literature, philosophy, music, art, religion, and so forth. They deal with subjective matters in subjective fashion, based on intuitions, inspirations, and/or opinions. Views offered in humanities may not be universally agreeable; they are subjective (opinions), not objective (facts). For example, an oil painting that may appear to be very beautiful to some may not be so to some others, and that's okay in humanities.

Second, sciences can be further categorized into two subgroups: *natural sciences* and *social sciences*. **Natural sciences** include physics, biology, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics, and so forth. They study objective matters in objective fashion, based on empirically observed and/or measured facts. Unlike reactions to works in humanities (e.g., oil paintings, novels, and songs) that can vary more or less, which is okay, if scientific studies of a given natural phenomenon offer two or more different answers, that wouldn't be okay at all. For example, "1+1" has to be 2, invariably, which is a fact, not an opinion (is it?). Or the boiling point of water at 1 atmosphere has to be 100˚ C (or 212˚ F), always. Who boils the water doesn't matter at all; things react to the same situation in the same way, regardless.

People are not things; they react to the same situation in different ways, depending on their own subjective perceptions of the reality, which are shaped by their own particular social conditions and locations. **Social sciences** study subjective matters (what people do and how they think) in objective fashion, based on empirically observed and/or measured facts. The fields in social sciences include sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, and so forth. Among these, the main focus of the first three is directly placed on "people."

The difference between sociology and psychology lies, roughly saying, in that the former tries to seek the cause of people's behaviors and attitudes in the external environment (i.e., their social conditions and locations), while the latter tries to find that in the inner environment (their psyche). The difference between sociology and anthropology lies in that although both refer to the

external environment (especially "culture"), the former studies social realities in modern societies growing after the Industrial Revolution (i.e., industrial and postindustrial societies) and the latter, those in premodern societies observed before the Industrial Revolution (hunting-gathering, horticultural-pastoral, and agricultural/feudalistic societies).

To restate what **sociology** is about, it is the scientific study of what people in industrial and postindustrial societies do (behaviors) and how they think (attitudes), referring to their social conditions and social locations, the scientific study that this textbook introduces through various topics.

Modern U.S. families may be very different in structure from what was

historically typical. (Photo courtesy of
Tony Alter/Wikimedia Commons)

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Glossary

culture
a group's shared practices, values, and beliefs

figuration
    the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of an individual and
    the society that shapes that behavior

reification
    an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material
    existence

society
    a group of people who live in a defined geographical area who interact
    with one another and who share a common culture

sociological imagination
    the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other
    people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in
    particular

sociology
    the systematic study of society and social interaction

The History of Sociology

- Explain why sociology emerged when it did
- Describe how sociology became a separate academic discipline

The turn of the nineteenth century saw great changes as the effects of **the Industrial Revolution**, which had started half a century ago. It was a time of great social, economic, and political upheaval with the collapse of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. In the first half of the nineteenth century alone, about 5 million Europeans, who had lost their traditionally perpetuated social environments based mostly on farming, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search for new jobs in the U.S. (Jones 1992). The field of study, new in that era, named "sociology" was *born* under such circumstances called "modernization."

Creating a Discipline

The Three Classical Theorists
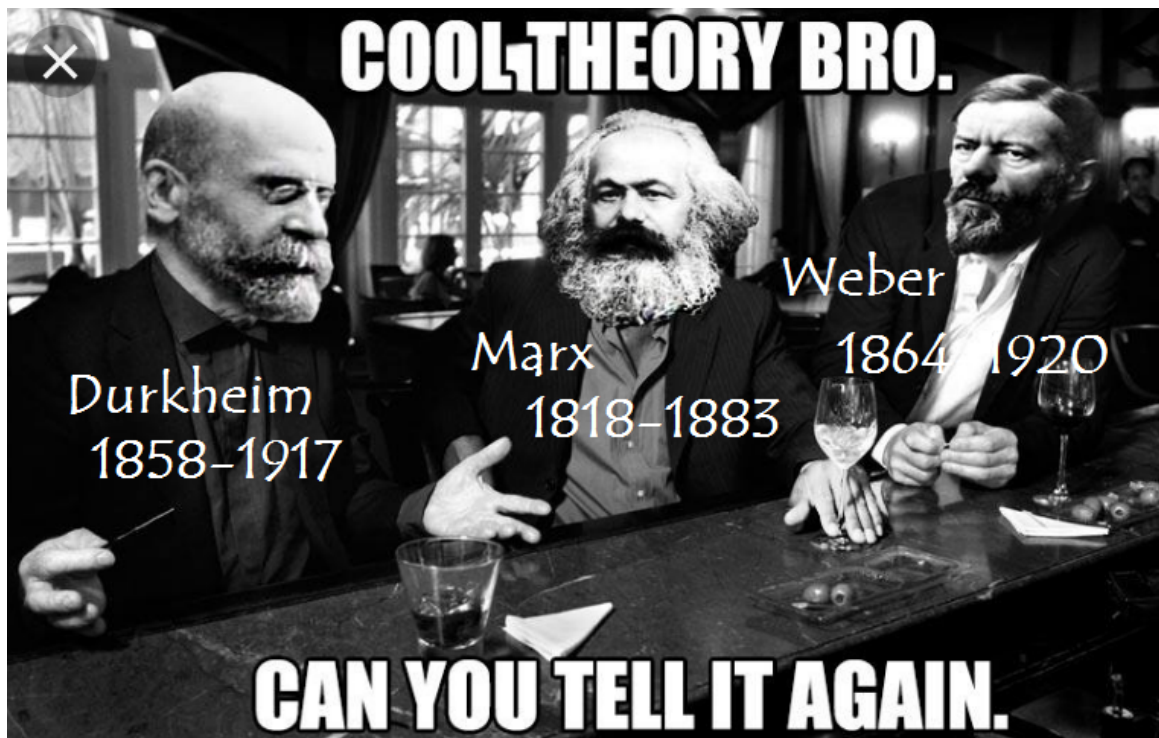
From the left, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber.
(Photo courtesy of pinterest.com)

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is one of the most important contributors to the birth of sociology. He was bitterly critical about what was going on under the rise, and the growth, of capitalism. In 1848, he, together with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), coauthored *The Communist Manifesto* (2006 [1848]), a very influential antithesis against capitalism--whose copy is kept in most libraries including, of course, the BMCC library.

According to Marx and Engels, capitalism--an economic system characterized by private ownership, free competition, and profit motive (will be discussed in Ch. 18)--led to irreconcilably great disparities in social, economic, and political power between the owners of the means of production (bourgeoisie) and the workers (proletariat). The vast majority of workers, previously peasants, who had left the land to work in cities, earned barely enough to eat. Things were so bad that the average worker died at age 30 (Edgerton 1992, p. 87). Such inequalities remain thickly still today; some CEOs of giant corporations enjoy private jets while many working class people, who work day and night, still face the difficulty in paying the rent of their small apartments.

Marx predicted that inequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt. This would lead to the collapse of capitalism, which would be replaced by communism, a political and economic system characterized by public ownership, cooperation, and equal distribution of necessities (will be discussed in Ch. 18). Marx believed that communism was the ultimately equitable system for all humans.

Marx's predictions remained to be a kind of fantasy until recently. According to a U.S. weekly magazine *The Nation* (2019, Nov. 25), however, global rebellions against so-called *neoliberalism*--i.e., a globally applicable method for preserving the current overwhelming imbalance of power--have started in many countries almost simultaneously in 2019, including Algeria, Bolivia (see the image below), Chile, Colombia,

Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Spain, Sudan, the UK, and Zimbabwe. They might turn out to be the starting point of Marx's prediction of proletariat revolutions. Let's keep our eyes on them...

Global Rebellions against Neoliberalism: A supporter of former president Evo Morales in Bolivia, November 13, 2019. *(AP / Natacha Pisarenko)*

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) helped establish sociology as a formal academic discipline by founding the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895 and by publishing his *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1896). In another important work, *Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim laid out his theory on how societies transformed from an old type (agricultural) to a new one (industrial). Also, his theory of *Suicide* (1897), constructed more than a century ago, is still used as a structurally clear model of sociological theories in sociological courses, such as this.

Durkheim examined suicide statistics in census data of major European countries in order to seek patterns that shaped the phenomenon. He found, to mention but a few, that suicide rates were higher among: single men compared to married men; childless people compared to parents; Protestants (who value individualism) compared to Catholics and Jews (who are bonded to other people through the church or synagogue). These findings led him to conclude that social isolation (or the lack of solidarity) was a major cause of suicide.

Suicide tends to be seen as an ultimate personal decision and, thus, as a psychological phenomenon. Durkheim, however, proved through his study based on empirical data that it is a social phenomenon to a great extent, and his study helped firmly establish the position of sociology among other fields of social science.

Max Weber (1864-1920) is known best for his 1904 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Basically, the Christian doctrine admonishes greediness for wealth, as seen in the saying: It is easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. However, the reformed denomination Protestantism (and Calvinism) encourages wealth as grace and labor as a devotion to God, interpreting the money as a sign of God's selection. Weber pointed to this ethic, which no other religion maintains, as the foremost energy for the rise of capitalism.

Weber's theory of the rise of capitalism based on Protestant work ethic remains controversial. Some support Weber's theory as a plausible explanation for the rise of capitalism. Others simply dismiss the connection between "work ethic" and "capitalism," suggesting that capitalism is not the system of work ethic, but that of gigantic financial and political power.

Weber differentiated between modern and premodern societies in terms of **rationalization**, i.e., the replacement of traditions, values, and emotions as the basis of actions with rational, calculated ones. In our contemporary societies, that is, our planning is dependent on market fluctuation, labor costs, mortgage rates, inventories, and zoning regulations (Rifkin 1987, p.

69). The goal is to finish our planning in the shortest time possible, at the least cost (efficiency, profit, and utility).

By sharp contrast, planning of premodern society has to be intimately bound up with group feelings and sensitivities about traditionally perpetuated cultural norms, such as the considerations for the superstitious matters, the spirituality of the people, the mother nature, etc., etc.

Weber also offered the discussions about **bureaucratization** in order to describe modern organizations' particular characteristics. They include hierarchy of (or vertically structured) authority, the division of labor based on specialization, written (and no hidden) records and rules, and impersonality of positions and interactions--which will be examined in Ch. 6, Groups and Organization.

Summary

Sociology was developed as a way to study and try to understand the changes to society brought on by the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of the earliest sociologists thought that societies and individuals' roles in society could be studied using the same scientific methodologies that were used in the natural sciences, while others believed that is was impossible to predict human behavior scientifically, and still others debated the value of such predictions. Those perspectives continue to be represented within sociology today.

Further Research

Many sociologists helped shape the discipline. To learn more about prominent sociologists and how they changed sociology check out http://openstaxcollege.org/l/ferdinand-toennies.

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Glossary

antipositivism
> the view that social researchers should strive for subjectivity as they worked to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values

generalized others
> the organized and generalized attitude of a social group

positivism
> the scientific study of social patterns

qualitative sociology
   in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or analysis of content sources as
   the source of its data

quantitative sociology
   statistical methods such as surveys with large numbers of participants

significant others
   specific individuals that impact a person's life

verstehen
   a German word that means to understand in a deep way

Theoretical Perspectives

- Explain what sociological theories are and how they are used
- Understand the similarities and differences between structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism

Sociologists study social events and develop theories in attempts to explain why things happen as they do, referring to social conditions (attached to our society as a whole) and social locations (attached to our "self"). A sociological **theory** is an explanation of how a given phenomenon happens, connecting that to the most closely related factor. A phenomenon in question is called the "dependent variable" and a closely related factor to it, the "independent variable." (About "variable," more will be explained in Ch. 2, Sociological Research.)

For example, although **suicide** is generally considered a personal decision, Émile Durkheim connected this phenomenon to social ties, or social **solidarity**, as one of the most closely related factors. Thus, he hypothesized that differences in suicide risks could be explained by the strength of solidarity. In his theory, suicide is the dependent variable and solidarity, the independent variable, that is, suicide depends on solidarity.

Durkheim gathered a large amount of data about Europeans who had ended their lives, and indeed found differences based on the strength of social ties, solidarity. Among men of similar ages who committed suicide, for example, more unmarried ones (low solidarity) were counted than married ones (good solidarity). Similarly, Protestants, who tend to be individualistic (low solidarity), were more likely to commit suicide than Catholics or Jews, who are collectively bonded (good solidarity) within themselves.

The introductory level of sociology courses (such as this) offers three major perspectives. Called **paradigms**, they are theoretical frameworks, each of which helps understand social realities through its own lens, including structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. These three will be referred to throughout the course. So you need to, and will, become familiar with these. Only three!

Sociological Paradigm	Level of Analysis	Focus
Structural Functionalism	Macro or mid	The way each part of society functions to maintain the whole structure
Conflict Theory	Macro	Inequalities between different social locations (e.g., social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and so on)
Symbolic Interactionism	Micro	Face-to-face interactions of individuals in everyday life through socially constructed and shared symbols

Sociological Theories or Perspectives

Functionalism

Émile Durkheim, one of the giant classical sociologists, maintained that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability (Durkheim 1893), the theoretical view called **functionalism** or structural functionalism.

Durkheim suggested that sociologists must be aware that social facts, which all serve to govern social life, are external of, and coercive to, individuals. Again, don't say "I think therefore I am."

To understand social facts, take the "language," for example. It is external of us. That is, it is our society that maintains it, not ourselves; we just learn and speak it. It is also coercive to us. No one is free from its rules; even such outlaws as gangsters follow its rules when they speak. Otherwise, other people wouldn't understand what they are saying. When a gangster means "I'll kill you" but says, "ll ll ou," people would be puzzled and say, "Excuse me? How can I help you?"

Another noted structural functionalist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), pointed out that social processes often have many functions, which simply mean "good things." There are two different types of functions: manifest functions and latent functions.

Manifest functions are good things resulting from the main purpose of a given social system, while **latent functions** are good things resulting not from the main purpose of a system, or to say, its by-products. The manifest functions of elementary school, for example, include skills in reading, writing, and calculating. Its latent functions include making friends, which is good but is not the main purpose of the system.

On the other hand, social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called **dysfunctions**, which simply mean "bad things." Although religion has a lot of functions, for example, its negative consequences can be also seen in many religious wars in our human history.

Criticism

One criticism of the structural-functional theory is that it can't adequately explain social change. Also problematic is the somewhat circular nature of this theory; repetitive behavior patterns are assumed to have a function, yet we profess to know that they have a function only because they are repeated. Furthermore, dysfunctions may continue, even though they don't serve a function, which seemingly contradicts the basic premise of the theory. Many sociologists now believe that functionalism is no longer useful as a macro-level theory, but that it does serve a useful purpose in some mid-level analyses.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory focuses on inequalities between different social locations, such as those in social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and so on. Karl Marx (1818–1883) initiated this perspective, observing lots of conflicts between capitalists (bourgeoisie) and laborers (proletariat). According to Marx, and his partner Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), "the modern bourgeois society

that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society (called "modernization") has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established… new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones" (Marx and Engels 2002 [1848]).

Here is the golden rule of capitalism: the lower the wage, the higher the profit. That is, bourgeoisie try to set the wage level as low as possible in order to make more profit. On the other hand, of course, proletariat demand the minimum wages as high as possible. Conflict? You bet!

More recently, inequality based on gender or race has been explained in a similar manner and has identified institutionalized power structures that help maintain inequality between groups. Janet Saltzman Chafetz (1941–2006) presented a model of **feminist theory** that attempts to explain the forces that maintain gender inequality as well as a theory of how such a system can be changed (Turner 2003).

Similarly, critical race theory grew out of a critical analysis of race and racism from a legal point of view. Critical race theory looks at structural inequality based on white privilege and associated wealth, power, and prestige.

Criticism

> **Note:**
> Farming and Locavores: How Sociological Perspectives Might View Food Consumption
> The consumption of food is a commonplace, daily occurrence, yet it can also be associated with important moments in our lives. Eating can be an individual or a group action, and eating habits and customs are influenced by our cultures. In the context of society, our nation's food system is at the core of numerous social movements, political issues, and economic debates. Any of these factors might become a topic of sociological study.

A structural-functional approach to the topic of food consumption might be interested in the role of the agriculture industry within the nation's economy and how this has changed from the early days of manual-labor farming to modern mechanized production. Another examination might study the different functions that occur in food production: from farming and harvesting to flashy packaging and mass consumerism.

A conflict theorist might be interested in the power differentials present in the regulation of food, by exploring where people's right to information intersects with corporations' drive for profit and how the government mediates those interests. Or a conflict theorist might be interested in the power and powerlessness experienced by local farmers versus large farming conglomerates, such as the documentary *Food Inc.* depicts as resulting from Monsanto's patenting of seed technology. Another topic of study might be how nutrition varies between different social classes.

A sociologist viewing food consumption through a symbolic interactionist lens would be more interested in micro-level topics, such as the symbolic use of food in religious rituals, or the role it plays in the social interaction of a family dinner. This perspective might also study the interactions among group members who identify themselves based on their sharing a particular diet, such as vegetarians (people who don't eat meat) or locavores (people who strive to eat locally produced food).

Just as structural functionalism was criticized for focusing too much on the stability of societies, conflict theory has been criticized because it tends to focus on conflict to the exclusion of recognizing stability. Many social structures are extremely stable or have gradually progressed over time rather than changing abruptly as conflict theory would suggest.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level sociology that focuses on how individuals interact with one another in everyday life. Communication—the exchange of meaning through symbols—is believed to be the way in which people make sense of their social worlds. It is important to see that the social reality does not necessarily stem from facts, but mostly from socially

constructed meanings and images through which people interact and, by doing so, make them "real." Theorists Herman and Reynolds (1994) note that this perspective sees people as being active in shaping the social world rather than simply being acted upon.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is considered a founder of symbolic interactionism though he never published his work on it (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Mead's student, Herbert Blumer, coined the term "symbolic interactionism" and outlined these basic premises: humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances (Blumer 1969). If you love books, for example, a symbolic interactionist might propose that you learned that books are good or important in the interactions you had with family, friends, school, or church; maybe your family had a special reading time each week, getting your library card was treated as a special event, or bedtime stories were associated with warmth and comfort.

Social scientists who apply symbolic-interactionist thinking look for patterns of interaction between individuals. Their studies often involve observation of one-on-one interactions. For example, while a conflict theorist studying a political protest might focus on class difference, a symbolic interactionist would be more interested in how individuals in the protesting group interact, as well as the signs and symbols protesters use to communicate their message. The focus on the importance of symbols in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman (1922–1982) to develop a technique called **dramaturgical analysis**. Goffman used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people's interactions showed patterns of cultural "scripts." Because it can be unclear what part a person may play in a given situation, he or she has to improvise his or her role as the situation unfolds (Goffman 1958).

Studies that use the symbolic interactionist perspective are more likely to use qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, because they seek to understand the symbolic worlds in which research subjects live.

Constructivism is an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be. We develop social constructs based on interactions with others, and those constructs that last over time are those that have meanings which are widely agreed-upon or generally accepted by most within the society. This approach is often used to understand what's defined as deviant within a society. There is no absolute definition of deviance, and different societies have constructed different meanings for deviance, as well as associating different behaviors with deviance. One situation that illustrates this is what you believe you're to do if you find a wallet in the street. In the United States, turning the wallet in to local authorities would be considered the appropriate action, and to keep the wallet would be seen as deviant. In contrast, many Eastern societies would consider it much more appropriate to keep the wallet and search for the owner yourself; turning it over to someone else, even the authorities, would be considered deviant behavior.

Criticism

Research done from this perspective is often scrutinized because of the difficulty of remaining objective. Others criticize the extremely narrow focus on symbolic interaction. Proponents, of course, consider this one of its greatest strengths.

Sociological Theory Today

These three approaches are still the main foundation of modern sociological theory, but some evolution has been seen. Structural-functionalism was a dominant force after World War II and until the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, sociologists began to feel that structural-functionalism did not sufficiently explain the rapid social changes happening in the United States at that time.

Conflict theory then gained prominence, as there was renewed emphasis on institutionalized social inequality. Critical theory, and the particular aspects

of feminist theory and critical race theory, focused on creating social change through the application of sociological principles, and the field saw a renewed emphasis on helping ordinary people understand sociology principles, in the form of public sociology.

Postmodern social theory attempts to look at society through an entirely new lens by rejecting previous macro-level attempts to explain social phenomena. Generally considered as gaining acceptance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, postmodern social theory is a micro-level approach that looks at small, local groups and individual reality. Its growth in popularity coincides with the constructivist aspects of symbolic interactionism.

Summary

Sociologists develop theories to explain social events, interactions, and patterns. A theory is a proposed explanation of those social interactions. Theories have different scales. Macro-level theories, such as structural functionalism and conflict theory, attempt to explain how societies operate as a whole. Micro-level theories, such as symbolic interactionism, focus on interactions between individuals.

Further Research

People often think of all conflict as violent, but many conflicts can be resolved nonviolently. To learn more about nonviolent methods of conflict resolution check out the Albert Einstein Institution
http://openstaxcollege.org/l/ae-institution

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Glossary

conflict theory
    a theory that looks at society as a competition for limited resources

constructivism
    an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be

dramaturgical analysis

a technique sociologists use in which they view society through the metaphor of theatrical performance

dynamic equilibrium
a stable state in which all parts of a healthy society work together properly

dysfunctions
social patterns that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society

function
the part a recurrent activity plays in the social life as a whole and the contribution it makes to structural continuity

functionalism
a theoretical approach that sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of individuals that make up that society

grand theories
an attempt to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions such as why societies form and why they change

hypothesis
a testable proposition

latent functions
the unrecognized or unintended consequences of a social process

macro-level
a wide-scale view of the role of social structures within a society

manifest functions
sought consequences of a social process

micro-level theories
the study of specific relationships between individuals or small groups

paradigms
    philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to
    formulate theories, generalizations, and the experiments performed in
    support of them

social facts
    the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals,
    and all of the cultural rules that govern social life

social institutions
    patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs

social solidarity
    the social ties that bind a group of people together such as kinship,
    shared location, and religion

symbolic interactionism
    a theoretical perspective through which scholars examine the
    relationship of individuals within their society by studying their
    communication (language and symbols)

theory
    a proposed explanation about social interactions or society

Why Study Sociology?

- Explain why it is worthwhile to study sociology
- Identify ways sociology is applied in the real world

…

Figure 1: The research of sociologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark helped the Supreme Court decide to end separate but equal racial segregation in schools in the United States. (Photo courtesy of public domain)

When Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, she was met by an angry crowd. But she knew she had the law on her side. Three years earlier in the landmark Brown vs. the Board of Education case, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned twenty-one state laws that allowed blacks and whites to be taught in separate school systems as long as the school systems were equal. One of the major factors in uencing that decision was research conducted by the husband-and- wife team of sociologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark.

Their research showed that segregation was harmful to young black schoolchildren, and the Court found that harm to be unconstitutional.

Since it was rst founded, many people interested in sociology have been driven by the scholarly desire to contribute knowledge to this eld, while others have seen it as way not only to study society but also to improve it. Besides desegregation, sociology has played a crucial role in many important social reforms, such as equal opportunity for women in the workplace, improved treatment for individuals with mental handicaps or learning disabilities, increased accessibility and accommodation for people with physical handicaps, the right of native populations to preserve their land and culture, and prison system reforms.

The prominent sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929), in his 1963 book Invitation to Sociology: A Human- istic Perspective, describes a sociologist as "someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined

way." He asserts that sociologists have a natural interest in the monumental moments of people's lives, as well as a fascination with banal, everyday occurrences. Berger also describes the aha moment when a sociological theory becomes applicable and understood:

[T]here is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don't people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology. (Berger 1963)

Sociology can be exciting because it teaches people ways to recognize how they t into the world and how others perceive them. Looking at themselves and society from a sociological perspective helps people see where they connect to di erent groups based on the many di erent ways they classify themselves and how society classi es them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classi cations such as economic and status levels, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation a ect perceptions.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. It makes people more aware that there are many di erent kinds of people in the world who do not necessarily think the way they do. It increases their willingness and ability to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. This prepares them to live and work in an increasingly diverse and integrated world.

1. **Sociology in the Workplace**

Employers continue to seek people with what are called transferable skills. This means that they want to hire people whose knowledge and education can be applied in a variety of settings and whose skills will contribute to various tasks. Studying sociology can provide people with this wide knowledge and a skill set that can contribute to many workplaces, including

•an understanding of social systems and large bureaucracies;

•the ability to devise and carry out research projects to assess whether a program or policy is working;

•the ability to collect, read, and analyze statistical information from polls or surveys;

•the ability to recognize important di erences in people's social, cultural, and economic backgrounds;

•skills in preparing reports and communicating complex ideas; and

•the capacity for critical thinking about social issues and problems that confront modern society. (Department of Sociology, University of Alabama)

Sociology prepares people for a wide variety of careers. Besides actually conducting social research or training others in the eld, people who graduate from college with a degree in sociology are hired by government agencies and corporations in elds such as social services, counseling (e.g., family planning, career, substance abuse), community planning, health

services, marketing, market research, and human resources. Even a small amount of training in sociology can be an asset in careers like sales, public relations, journalism, teaching, law, and criminal justice.

: The phenomenon known as Facebook was designed speci cally for students. Whereas earlier generations wrote notes in each other's printed yearbooks at the end of the academic year, modern technology and the Internet ushered in dynamic new ways for people to interact socially. Instead of having to meet up on campus, students can call, text, and Skype from their dorm rooms. Instead of a study group gathering weekly in the library, online forums and chat rooms help learners connect. The availability and immediacy of computer technology has forever changed the ways in which students engage with each other.

Now, after several social networks have vied for primacy, a few have established their place in the market and some have attracted niche audience. While Facebook launched the social networking trend geared toward teens and young adults, now people of all ages are actively friending each other. LinkedIn distinguished itself by focusing on professional connections and served as a virtual world for workplace networking. Newer o shoots like Foursquare help people connect based on the real-world places they frequent, while Twitter has cornered the market on brevity.

The widespread ownership of smartphones adds to this social experience; the Pew Research Center (2012) found that the majority of people in the United States with mobile phones now have smart phones with Internet capability. Many people worldwide can now access Facebook, Twitter, and other social media from virtually anywhere, and there seems to be an increasing acceptance of smartphone use in many diverse and previously prohibited settings. The outcomes of smartphone use, as with other social media, are not yet clear.

These newer modes of social interaction have also spawned harmful consequences, such as cyberbul- lying and what some call FAD, or Facebook Addiction Disorder. Researchers have also examined other potential negative impacts, such as whether Facebooking lowers a student's GPA, or whether there might be long-term e ects of replacing face-to-face interaction with social media.

All of these social networks demonstrate emerging ways that people interact, whether positive or negative. They illustrate how sociological topics are alive and changing today. Social media will most certainly be a developing topic in the study of sociology for decades to come.

1. **Summary**

Studying sociology is bene cial both for the individual and for society. By studying sociology people learn how to think critically about social issues and problems that confront our society. The study of sociology enriches students' lives and prepares them for careers in an increasingly diverse world. Society bene ts because people with sociological training are better prepared to make informed decisions about social issues and take e ective action to deal with them.

1. **Further Research**

Social communication is rapidly evolving due to ever improving technologies. To learn more about how sociologists study the impact of these changes check out http://openstaxcollege.org/l/media[1]

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Introduction to Sociological Research

class="introduction"

Many believe that crime rates go up during the full moon, but scientific research does not support this conclusion. (Photo courtesy of pxhere.com)

Photo cortesy: pxhere.com

Laypeople (i.e., those who've never taken social science courses, such as this) can also have their own opinions about things happening around, and within, themselves. Chances are, however, their limited personal experiences and knowledge and socially shared prejudice/stereotypes tend to lead them to views more or less biased. To check your own view, for example, answer this question: What percent of Americans today believe that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking?

Photo Courtesy of Littleton View Co, Publishers

Here is the answer. Between 2000 and 2016, 71% of respondents in a series of surveys conducted in the U.S. (n=13,038) said they believed spanking was necessary (The General Social Survey 2016). Is this answer, based on the empirical data, close to your guessing?

In order to understand what a given phenomenon is *actually* like, social scientists (including sociologists, of course) conduct research to gather data (empirical evidence) related to the phenomenon in question, in systematic fashion. The research methods include surveys, field research, experiments, and so on.

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The General Social Survey (GSS), a project of the independent research organization NORC at the University of Chicago. (https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/).

Glossary

empirical evidence
>   evidence that comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation

meta-analysis
>   a technique in which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together

Approaches to Sociological Research

- Define and describe the scientific method
- Explain how the scientific method is used in sociological research
- Understand the function and importance of an interpretive framework
- Define what reliability and validity mean in a research study

Sociologists begin their research by asking a question about how or why a given phenomenon happens in a given condition but doesn't happen in another condition. In other words, they ask, "What makes the difference between 'happening' and 'not happening'?" For example, some people support "spanking" while others don't. Or some people think about "suicide" while others never do so. Sociologists now ask: What makes the difference between those who support spanking and those who don't, or between those who think about suicide and those who never do so? In order to find the answer, *as unbiased as possible*, the researcher adopts scientific approaches and sets a particular research design. The following sections describe such approaches and designs.

The Scientific Method

The scientific method involves developing and testing theories about the world based on empirical evidence. It is defined by its commitment to systematic observation of the empirical world and strives to be objective, critical, skeptical, and logical. It involves a series of prescribed steps that have been established over centuries of scholarship.

Typically, the scientific method starts with these steps: 1) ask a question, 2) examine previously conducted studies, 3) choose variables (which will be explained below), 4) formulate a hypothesis (optional), 5) design research and gather data, 6) analyze them, and 7) report the findings.

The Flow of Scientific Method

1. Ask questions about a given phenomenon;
2. Review previously conducted studies;
3. Choose variables;
4. Formulate a hypothesis (optional);

5. Design research and gather data;
6. Analyze data in search for patterns; and
7. Report findings.

Variables

Scientific studies are based on "variables." A **variable** can be defined as a characteristic that has two or more attributes through which we can see what a given object (or person) is like--or anything that varies.

Gender, for example, is a variable that has two attributes, i.e., female and male. Race is also a variable, having several attributes. What about social class (a combined variable of education, occupation, and income)? Also, marital status, sexual orientation, age...?

Something that doesn't vary is called "constant." Speed of the light is said to be a constant, for example. Or sex of people who can get pregnant is a constant. Although students' GPA is a variable, to make it sure, the final grade for a student who never took exams at all throughout the semester seems to be a constant. In short, if there's only one answer--as in sex of a pregnant person--it's a constant, not a variable.

There are two types of variables that construct a theory, namely, the **independent variable** (or X) and the **dependent variable** (Y). The former (X) is the *cause*, or the condition that can make it happen, and the latter (Y), the *effect*, or a phenomenon that is made happen. Notice that the structure of a theory consists of only two things: the dependent variable (Y) and the independent variable (X).

Having the dependent variable (or a phenomenon in question) in mind, now, choose an independent variable that seems to make it happen. Durkheim, for example, chose "solidarity" (the independent variable) that he believed shapes the suicide risks (the dependent variable). Of course, there are many other variables that can affect the suicide risks. But a theory cannot be expected to drag tens of variables within itself. So focus on as few independent variables as possible.

Formulate a Hypothesis and Construct a Theory

A **hypothesis** can be understood as a baby (or a starting point) of a theory. In terms of the structure, they are the same, consisting of only two things: the dependent variable and the independent variable. When a hypothesis is approved by a large number of scholars, it can be considered a theory. It is a statement about how the dependent variable and the independent variable are related to one another; it makes a conjectural statement about the relationship between those variables.

The chronological order between the two types of variables is this. X (the independent variable) takes place, first, and then, Y (the dependent variable) may follow. To use the theory of suicide as an example for this, X (bad solidarity) takes place, first, and then, Y (suicide) may follow.

Although this example is not sociological, to make things simple, "smoking is a leading cause of cancer and death from cancer," according to National Cancer Institute. In this case, smoking is the independent variable and cancer, the dependent variable. X (smoking) takes place, first, and then, Y (cancer) may follow.

The Rule #1 to Understand Theories

To be noted, though, theories are not about 100% or 0%, but about tendencies, or "more likely" or "less likely." Indeed, not every smoker gets cancer. Conversely, some heavy smokers don't get cancer. Can these facts nullify the theory that connects smoking and cancer? The answer is "No" because the statement is about tendencies such that smokers are "more likely" than non-smokers to get cancer. This is one of the major rules to understand what theories are about.

The Rule #2 to Understand Theories

Another rule to understand what theories are about is that no theory can be expected to spell out a phenomenon in question. To use Durkheim's theory of suicide, for example, although suicide is explained in terms of solidarity, as aforementioned, there are many other causes for suicide, such as bankruptcy, serious illness, chronic physical pain, and so forth. Should Durkheim's theory be undermined? The answer is, again, "No" because a theory is not expected to spell out a phenomenon, but to explain it in relation to as few variables as possible.

Summary

Using the scientific method, a researcher conducts a study in five phases: asking a question, researching existing sources, formulating a hypothesis, conducting a study, and drawing conclusions. The scientific method is useful in that it provides a clear method of organizing a study. Some sociologists conduct research through an interpretive framework rather than employing the scientific method.

Scientific sociological studies often observe relationships between variables. Researchers study how one variable changes another. Prior to conducting a study, researchers are careful to apply operational definitions to their terms and to establish dependent and independent variables.

Further Research

For a historical perspective on the scientific method in sociology, read "The Elements of Scientific Method in Sociology" by F. Stuart Chapin (1914) in the *American Journal of Sociology*: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Method-in-Sociology

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"Scientific Method Lab," the University of Utah, http://aspire.cosmic-ray.org/labs/scientific_method/sci_method_main.html.

Glossary

dependent variables
    a variable changed by other variables

hypothesis
    a testable educated guess about predicted outcomes between two or more variables

independent variables
    variables that cause changes in dependent variables

interpretive framework
    a sociological research approach that seeks in-depth understanding of a topic or subject through observation or interaction; this approach is not based on hypothesis testing

literature review
    a scholarly research step that entails identifying and studying all existing studies on a topic to create a basis for new research

operational definitions
    specific explanations of abstract concepts that a researcher plans to study

reliability
    a measure of a study's consistency that considers how likely results are to be replicated if a study is reproduced

scientific method
    an established scholarly research method that involves asking a question, researching existing sources, forming a hypothesis, designing

and conducting a study, and drawing conclusions

validity
the degree to which a sociological measure accurately reflects the topic of study

Research Methods

- Differentiate between four kinds of research methods: surveys, field research, experiments, and secondary data analysis
- Understand why different topics are better suited to different research approaches

In planning a research design, sociologists generally choose from four widely used methods of social investigation: survey, field research, experiment, and secondary data analysis (or use of existing sources). Their choice of the methods depends on several conditions, such as the limitation of time and budget, the type of their topic, the accessibility of the research target, and so on.

Surveys

As a research method, a **survey** collects data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about attitudes and behaviors, often in the form of a questionnaire. The survey is one of the most widely used scientific research methods as it can be analyzed statistically. Also, the standard survey format allows participants a level of anonymity in which they can express personal ideas about sensitive matters, such as suicide, sexuality, and the like.

Questionnaires are a common research method; the U.S. Census is a well-known example. (Photo courtesy of Kathryn Decker/flickr)

Sociologists conduct surveys under controlled conditions for specific purposes. Surveys gather different types of information from people. While surveys are not great at capturing the ways people really behave in social situations, they are a great method for discovering how people feel and think—or at least how they say they feel and think. Surveys can track preferences for presidential candidates or reported individual behaviors (such as sleeping, driving, or texting habits) or factual information such as employment status, income, and education levels.

Population and Sample--and Random Sample

A survey targets a specific **population**, all people who share a given characteristic for the researcher to study. When the size of a population is too big, the researcher chooses to survey a small sector of a population called a **sample**: that is, a manageable number of subjects that should *represent* its own entire population. Okay, but how can it (a small number of subjects) represent its own ENTIRE population?

The success of a study depends on how well the population is represented by the sample. For this, the researcher uses a **random sample**, a method in which every person in a population has the same chance of being chosen in the sample. According to the laws of probability, random samples, as long as they are random samples, well represent the entire population. See below: an analogy of how a random sample works.

1. Population, 2. Sample, 3. Random Sample, and 4. Analysis

Courtesy of huislaw.com   Courtesy of wakystock.com   Courtesy of Clipartreview.com

As shown above,

1. A population can be likened to a large pot of soup.
2. A sample, to a ladle of soup.
3. Random sample, to stirring up the pot of soup.
4. Analysis, to sipping the ladle of soup.

Through random sample, and only through it, the researcher can accurately report the taste of the entire soup, or the tendency of a large number of people (population)

through a smaller size of sample.

Here is an example. The U.S. media outlets predict the presidential election, relying on their own surveys. In this case, the **population** consists of all American voters (231 million people). The typical number of voters who respond to the surveys is a little larger than 1,000. This collection of voters whose voice is directly studied is called a **sample**. The question is, how can this small number of voters represent all American voters? Statistically saying, again, if the method of choosing the voters is **random sample**, it should be able to represent its population--although it's not easy, and some researchers fail, embarrassingly.

Here is an embarrassing example of a failed random sample. In 1936, a research institute predicted that the Republican candidate would win landslide for the presidential election, based on its own survey. The result was, however, the Democratic candidate won landslide. What was wrong? The survey collected opinions from people found in telephone books and car registration lists. Hey, who owned telephones or cars in 1936!? Only rich people!! Those who didn't own telephones or cars at that time didn't have "the same chance of being chosen in the sample," but they were a large part of the population having their own voice.

An **interview** is a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject, and it is a way of conducting surveys on a topic. Interviews are similar to the short-answer questions on surveys in that the researcher asks subjects a series of questions. However, participants are free to respond as they wish, without being limited by predetermined choices. In the back-and-forth conversation of an interview, a researcher can ask for clarification, spend more time on a subtopic, or ask additional questions. In an interview, a subject will ideally feel free to open up and answer questions that are often complex. There are no right or wrong answers. The subject might not even know how to answer the questions honestly.

Questions such as, "How did society's view of alcohol consumption influence your decision whether or not to take your first sip of alcohol?" or "Did you feel that the divorce of your parents would put a social stigma on your family?" involve so many factors that the answers are difficult to categorize. A researcher needs to avoid steering or prompting the subject to respond in a specific way; otherwise, the results will prove to be unreliable. And, obviously, a sociological interview is not an interrogation. The researcher will benefit from gaining a subject's trust, from empathizing or commiserating with a subject, and from listening without judgment.

Field Research

The work of sociology rarely happens in limited, confined spaces. Sociologists seldom study subjects in their own offices or laboratories. Rather, sociologists go out into the

world. They meet subjects where they live, work, and play. **Field research** refers to gathering **primary data** from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey. It is a research method suited to an interpretive framework rather than to the scientific method. To conduct field research, the sociologist must be willing to step into new environments and observe, participate, or experience those worlds. In field work, the sociologists, rather than the subjects, are the ones out of their element.

The researcher interacts with or observes a person or people and gathers data along the way. The key point in field research is that it takes place in the subject's natural environment, whether it's a coffee shop or tribal village, a homeless shelter or the DMV, a hospital, airport, mall, or beach resort.

Photo Courtesy of Olympic National Park

Sociological researchers travel across countries and cultures to interact with and observe subjects in their natural environments. (Photo courtesy of IMLS Digital Collections and Content/flickr and Olympic National Park)

Participant Observation

In 2000, a comic writer named Rodney Rothman wanted an insider's view of white-collar work. He slipped into the sterile, high-rise offices of a New York "dot com" agency. Every day for two weeks, he pretended to work there. His main purpose was simply to see whether anyone would notice him or challenge his presence. No one did. The receptionist greeted him. The employees smiled and said good morning. Rothman was accepted as part of the team. He even went so far as to claim a desk, inform the receptionist of his whereabouts, and attend a meeting. He published an article about his experience in *The New Yorker* called "My Fake Job" (2000). Later, he was discredited for allegedly fabricating some details of the story and *The New Yorker* issued an apology. However, Rothman's entertaining article still offered fascinating descriptions of the inside workings of a "dot com" company and exemplified the lengths to which a sociologist will go to uncover material.

Rothman had conducted a form of study called **participant observation**, in which researchers join people and participate in a group's routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context. This method lets researchers experience a specific aspect of social life. A researcher might go to great lengths to get a firsthand look into a trend, institution, or behavior. Researchers temporarily put themselves into roles and record their observations. A researcher might work as a waitress in a diner, live as a homeless person for several weeks, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat. Often, these researchers try to blend in seamlessly with the population they study, and they may not disclose their true identity or purpose if they feel it would compromise the results of their research.

Is she a working waitress or a sociologist conducting a study using participant observation? (Photo courtesy of zoetnet/flickr)

Experiments

You've probably tested personal social theories. "If I study at night and review in the morning, I'll improve my retention skills." Or, "If I stop drinking soda, I'll feel better." If X, then Y. When you test your hypothetical assumption through an **experiment**, your results either prove or disprove it.

There are two main types of experiments: lab-based experiments and natural or field experiments. In a lab setting, the research can be controlled so that perhaps more data can be recorded in a certain amount of time. In a natural or field-based experiment, the generation of data cannot be controlled but the information might be considered more accurate since it was collected without interference or intervention by the researcher.

As a research method, either type of sociological experiment is useful for testing *if-then* statements: *if* a particular thing happens, *then* another particular thing will result. To set up a lab-based experiment, sociologists create artificial situations that allow them to manipulate variables.

A Typical Design of Experiments

A typical--that is, not every--experimental design separates participants into two groups. One is the **experimental group** and the other, the **control group**. All other things being as equal as possible, such as age, gender, and so on, there is only one difference between the two groups, the independent variable(s). That is, the experimental group is exposed to the independent variable(s), and the control group is not. If the independent variable (X) has an effect, then, there should be a difference between the two groups in the dependent variable (Y), in a while.

A math tutoring program can be an example of the independent variable whose effects (math skills, the dependent variable) can be tested through an experiment. The experimental design is this. Children in the experimental group take the program, and those in the control group don't. In a while, if the children in the experimental group perform in math tests better than those in the control group, we can conclude that the program is functional, that is, if the program (X), then better math skills (Y).

Or some scientists conduct experiments to test if GMOs (genetically modified organisms) can cause cancer. Typically, they use mice, separating tens of them into, on the one hand, the experimental group and, on the other, the control group. Which group do you think gets GMOs? Oh, no, no, for this kind of experiments, humans cannot be used--although in the real world, we are actually getting lots of GMOs...

Secondary Data Analysis

While sociologists often engage in original research studies, they also contribute knowledge to the discipline through **secondary data analysis**. Secondary data doesn't result from firsthand research collected from primary sources, but are the already completed work of other researchers. Sociologists might study works written by historians, economists, teachers, or early sociologists. They might search through periodicals, newspapers, or magazines from any period in history.

Summary

Sociological research is a fairly complex process. As you can see, a lot goes into even a simple research design. There are many steps and much to consider when collecting data on human behavior, as well as in interpreting and analyzing data in order to form conclusive results. Sociologists use scientific methods for good reason. The scientific method provides a system of organization that helps researchers plan and conduct the study while ensuring that data and results are reliable, valid, and objective.

The many methods available to researchers—including experiments, surveys, field studies, and secondary data analysis—all come with advantages and disadvantages. The strength of a study can depend on the choice and implementation of the appropriate method of gathering research. Depending on the topic, a study might use a single method or a combination of methods. It is important to plan a research design before undertaking a study. The information gathered may in itself be surprising, and the study design should provide a solid framework in which to analyze predicted and unpredicted data.

Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges

Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges
Survey	• Questionnaires • Interviews	• Yields many responses • Can survey a large sample • Quantitative data are easy to chart	• Can be time consuming • Can be difficult to encourage participant response • Captures what people think and believe but not necessarily how they behave in real life
Field Work	• Observation • Participant observation • Ethnography • Case study	• Yields detailed, accurate real-life information	• Time consuming • Data captures how people behave but not what they think and believe • Qualitative data is difficult to organize

Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges
Experiment	• Deliberate manipulation of social customs and mores	• Tests cause and effect relationships	• Hawthorne Effect • Ethical concerns about people's wellbeing
Secondary Data Analysis	• Analysis of government data (census, health, crime statistics) • Research of historic documents	• Makes good use of previous sociological information	• Data could be focused on a purpose other than yours • Data can be hard to find

Main Sociological Research MethodsSociological research methods have advantages and disadvantages.

Further Research

For information on current real-world sociology experiments, visit: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Sociology-Experiments

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Glossary

case study
        in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual

content analysis
        applying a systematic approach to record and value information gleaned from
        secondary data as it relates to the study at hand

correlation
        when a change in one variable coincides with a change in another variable, but
        does not necessarily indicate causation

ethnography
        observing a complete social setting and all that it entails

experiment
        the testing of a hypothesis under controlled conditions

field research
        gathering data from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a
        survey

Hawthorne effect
        when study subjects behave in a certain manner due to their awareness of being
        observed by a researcher

interview
        a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject

nonreactive research
        using secondary data, does not include direct contact with subjects and will not
        alter or influence people's behaviors

participant observation
        when a researcher immerses herself in a group or social setting in order to make
        observations from an "insider" perspective

population
        a defined group serving as the subject of a study

primary data
        data that are collected directly from firsthand experience

quantitative data
        represent research collected in numerical form that can be counted

qualitative data
    comprise information that is subjective and often based on what is seen in a
    natural setting

random sample
    a study's participants being randomly selected to serve as a representation of a
    larger population

samples
    small, manageable number of subjects that represent the population

secondary data analysis
    using data collected by others but applying new interpretations

surveys
    collect data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about behaviors
    and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire

Ethical Concerns

- Understand why ethical standards exist
- Demonstrate awareness of the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics
- Define value neutrality

Sociologists conduct studies to shed light on human behaviors. Knowledge is a powerful tool that can be used toward positive change. And while a sociologist's goal is often simply to uncover knowledge rather than to spur action, many people use sociological studies to help improve people's lives. In that sense, conducting a sociological study comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility. Like any researchers, sociologists must consider their ethical obligation to avoid harming subjects or groups while conducting their research.

The American Sociological Association, or ASA, is the major professional organization of sociologists in North America. The ASA is a great resource for students of sociology as well. The ASA maintains a **code of ethics**—formal guidelines for conducting sociological research—consisting of principles and ethical standards to be used in the discipline. It also describes procedures for filing, investigating, and resolving complaints of unethical conduct.

Practicing sociologists and sociology students have a lot to consider. Some of the guidelines state that researchers must try to be skillful and fair-minded in their work, especially as it relates to their human subjects. Researchers must obtain participants' informed consent and inform subjects of the responsibilities and risks of research before they agree to partake. During a study, sociologists must ensure the safety of participants and immediately stop work if a subject becomes potentially endangered on any level.

Researchers are required to protect the privacy of research participants whenever possible. Even if pressured by authorities, such as police or courts, researchers are not ethically allowed to release confidential information. Researchers must make results available to other sociologists, must make public all sources of financial support, and must not accept

funding from any organization that might cause a conflict of interest or seek to influence the research results for its own purposes. The ASA's ethical considerations shape not only the study but also the publication of results.

Pioneer German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) identified another crucial ethical concern. Weber understood that personal values could distort the framework for disclosing study results. While he accepted that some aspects of research design might be influenced by personal values, he declared it was entirely inappropriate to allow personal values to shape the interpretation of the responses. Sociologists, he stated, must establish **value neutrality**, a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results (1949). Sociologists are obligated to disclose research findings without omitting or distorting significant data.

Is value neutrality possible? Many sociologists believe it is impossible to set aside personal values and retain complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may, by necessity, contain a certain amount of value bias. It does not discredit the results but allows readers to view them as one form of truth rather than a singular fact. Some sociologists attempt to remain uncritical and as objective as possible when studying cultural institutions. Value neutrality does not mean having no opinions. It means striving to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when analyzing data. It means avoiding skewing data in order to match a predetermined outcome that aligns with a particular agenda, such as a political or moral point of view. Investigators are ethically obligated to report results, even when they contradict personal views, predicted outcomes, or widely accepted beliefs.

Summary

Sociologists and sociology students must take ethical responsibility for any study they conduct. They must first and foremost guarantee the safety of their participants. Whenever possible, they must ensure that participants have been fully informed before consenting to be part of a study.

The ASA maintains ethical guidelines that sociologists must take into account as they conduct research. The guidelines address conducting studies, properly using existing sources, accepting funding, and publishing results.

Sociologists must try to maintain value neutrality. They must gather and analyze data objectively and set aside their personal preferences, beliefs, and opinions. They must report findings accurately, even if they contradict personal convictions.

Further Research

Founded in 1905, the ASA is a nonprofit organization located in Washington, DC, with a membership of 14,000 researchers, faculty members, students, and practitioners of sociology. Its mission is "to articulate policy and implement programs likely to have the broadest possible impact for sociology now and in the future." Learn more about this organization at http://openstaxcollege.org/l/ASA.

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Glossary

code of ethics
    a set of guidelines that the American Sociological Association has established to foster ethical research and professionally responsible scholarship in sociology

value neutrality
>   a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment during the course of a study and in publishing results

Introduction to Culture

class="introduction"

People adhere to various rules and standards that are created and maintained in culture, such as giving a high five to someone. (Photo courtesy of Chris Barnes/flickr)

Glossary

culture
    shared beliefs, values, and practices

society
    people who live in a definable community and who share a culture

What Is Culture?

- Differentiate between culture and society
- Explain material versus nonmaterial culture
- Discuss the concept of cultural universalism as it relates to society
- Compare and contrast ethnocentrism and xenocentrism

"We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the fish" (Carpenter 1970). If the water is to the fish, then what is to the human? Oh no, don't say, "Isn't that the air?" Why? That's because this is a sociology course and because this chapter is specifically about culture. Yes, culture, one of the major social conditions that shapes what we do and how we think, is the answer to this question.

Here is a clarification of this answer. Although the fish doesn't "discover" the water while dipped in the water, if the fish got out of the water, it would painfully notice that the water is missing. Likewise, if people migrate from one society to another, or if their societies are drastically changing, they will notice how firmly their lives have been depending on their own old culture.

This is what actually happened to Europeans whose societies were drastically changing from the old type to the new one, a historically significant event called **modernization**, the main product of the **Industrial Revolution**. Having lost their old social environments and statuses--typically, peasants in small folk villages--many migrated to urban areas, 65% of whom (or 5 million), to the United States, in search for jobs (McKeown 2007).

In the new world, their old characteristics--obedient, honest, hard-working, communal, and docile--lost their values. Rather, for the same reason, for which they had been praised in their old villages, they were now looked down upon, or even discriminated against. The new environments required them to act as individuals not as folks. They must have felt as if they became the fish struggling with the water missing.

Returning to ourselves now, let's notice that what those Europeans faced was just the starting point of social change that never ends since then.

Today indeed, our world keeps drastically changing under so-called globalization, under which people, money, and goods and services are bewilderingly moving around between, and within, the first world countries and the third world countries. Metaphorically, we've become the fish always trying to find a new way to live in such unknown environments, or maybe trying to return to the water.

Recall the definition of **culture**--a historically developed, yet ever changing set of rules, know-hows, and tools that support social life and survival both on the individual level and on the group level. As social environments keep drastically changing, we need to adjust our own culture to them, all the time, but our reactions to such changing environments are, always, far from uniform; some try to find new ways forward while others try to return to the "water" backward. This variance in our reactions can yield a variety of social issues. For example, some support the idea of "diversity" while others claim "Make America *white* again."

How would a visitor from the suburban United States act and feel on this crowded Tokyo train? (Photo courtesy of simonglucas/flickr)

Summary

Though "society" and "culture" are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. A society is an entity in which its members interact with one another under some sets of rules, which include culture. Other than such rules (values and norms), culture also provides traditionally perpetuated ideas (know-hows) and tools that support survival both on the individual level and group level.

Further Research

In January 2011, a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America presented evidence indicating that the hormone oxytocin could regulate and manage instances of ethnocentrism. Read the full article here: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/oxytocin

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CA; Center for Global, International and Regional Studies.

Glossary

cultural imperialism
>   the deliberate imposition of one's own cultural values on another culture

cultural relativism
>   the practice of assessing a culture by its own standards, and not in comparison to another culture

cultural universals
>   patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies

culture shock
>   an experience of personal disorientation when confronted with an unfamiliar way of life

ethnocentrism
>   the practice of evaluating another culture according to the standards of one's own culture

material culture
>   the objects or belongings of a group of people

nonmaterial culture
>   the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society

xenocentrism
>   a belief that another culture is superior to one's own

Elements of Culture

- Understand how values and beliefs differ from norms
- Explain the significance of symbols and language to a culture
- Explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
- Discuss the role of social control within culture

Material vs. Nonmaterial

Every culture is made up of two aspects, namely, **material culture** (any cultural matters that we can see and touch) and **nonmaterial culture** (any cultural practices that we cannot see or touch unless actions taken). Major examples of the former (material culture) include food, shelter, and clothing. Those of the latter (nonmaterial culture) include "norms and values" (discussed below), the language, religion, music, dance, cooking, art, and so on.

Both material and nonmaterial culture are related to "a set of rules, know-hows, and tools that support social life and survival both on the individual level and on the group level," the definition of culture. This means that they summarize, or succinctly stand for, what cultures are for.

Values and Norms (Nonmaterial)

Values
Within nonmaterial culture, the most important elements, in terms of attitudes (how people think) and behaviors (what they do), are values and norms. Cultural **values** are socially shared "attitudes" toward what is important and what is not. They vary across societies and change over time.

For example, "Time is money," people say. But it is so only in our modern societies and was not in old types of societies. The clock is set at schools, factories, and offices, indeed, but it was not at farms. It became the indispensable instrument of industrialized and post-industrialized societies (Rifkin 1987, p. 102; paraphrased). Time is money today (in our modern societies) literally for those who are paid on the basis of the number of

hours they worked. It was not the case for farmers in small folk villages (premodern societies).

Other than "time," modern individuals tend to value distinction between achieved statuses and ascribed statuses (which will be discussed in Ch. 5, Society and Social Interaction), between self-interests and group's expectations, between private and public matters, between formal and informal matters, and so on.

Norms
Cultural **norms** govern socially acceptable "behaviors," i.e., they can be seen as rules for what is appropriate to do and what is not. Just like values, they also vary across societies and change over time. This means that following the norm of one's own society may be violating the norm of another society. This can involve "culture shock," a social psychological phenomenon resulting from an encounter with a totally different culture-- which is discussed below.

Values and norms are oftentimes closely intertwined. Using the value of "time," for example, organizing an event without caring about time can be violating a norm of middle-class people in modern societies. Likewise, making someone stay in office after hours in modern societies is violating not just a cultural norm but also a formal rule.

Likewise, in our modern societies, in which privacy is valued, visiting other people's place without a call or text message, even if it is totally informal, can be considered the violation of the norm.

Cultural Universals

Again, cultures vary. On the other hand, though, there are cultural practices called **cultural universals** that can be observed in every society, although their forms may vary. This tells us that although cultures vary, human needs seem, to a great extent, universal. For example, the language varies across cultures, but in every society, people speak their language. The language is, thus, a cultural universal. Other examples include: music, dance, art, cooking, funeral, and so forth. Their forms, again, may vary, but every

society maintains these practices one way or another, and thus, they are cultural universals.

On the other hand, though, think about cultural practices that are not cultural universals. To have kids' birthday parties, for example, isn't pizza a kind of "must"? If there were no pizza served, kids would get mad or, at least, puzzled. But is pizza a cultural universal for kids' birthday parties? Or, we need to ask, are birthday parties themselves cultural universal, or to say, does every society have them? Think about it... What about watching TV? Surfing the Internet? Drinking cold beer, listening to headbanging rock music?

Ethnocentrism vs. Cultural Relativism--and Its Discontent

Ethnocentrism
Often, people firmly believe that all other people engage in cultural practices they themselves engage in. To them, in other words, every cultural aspect of their own is culturally universal. For example, some ask, "How do you get the marriage license in your country?" In many countries, unlike the U.S., there's no such thing as "marriage license." Or, "What's the most popular dessert in your country?" Sorry, but "dessert" is a European cultural custom, which although many Americans share, many others don't.

This tendency, in which "one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it," is called **ethnocentrism** (Sumner 2002 [1907], p. 13). It is a self-centered attitude on the group level. The type of group doesn't matter; it can be any, such as race/ethnicity, nations, cities, villages, schools, sport teams, and even gender. If that's about "marriage license" or "dessert," there's no problem. If that's about patriotism or racism, however, ethnocentrism can yield bitter conflicts.

For example, a poem "The White Man's Burden" written at the turn of the nineteenth century not only justified the conquest of non-whites (half devil and half child, according to this poem) by whites, but it even obliged the conquerors to "take up the white man's burden." The spirit of this poem seems to remain intact still today (see, e.g., Easterly 2006).

The ironic aspect of this tendency is, though, that ethnocentrism is negatively related to maturity or knowledgeability. That is, the less mature or knowledgeable, the more ethnocentric, or conversely, the more mature or knowledgeable, the less ethnocentric. This means that when people claim their group's superiority loud (more ethnocentric), they are exposing their inferiority loud (less mature) without noticing as such.

The conquest and colonization involve various events, such as political dominance, economic exploitation of labor power and natural resources, and, among others, **cultural imperialism**, the imposition of culture of the stronger on the weaker. This is an extremely negative aspect of ethnocentrism. For example, Japan annexed Korea in 1910, after which the conqueror launched a program to "Japanize" Korea, ultimately requiring Koreans to adopt Japanese names and worship in Japanese Shinto shrines (see, e.g., Kane et al. 2009).

To be noted, though, cultural imperialism is not unique to colonization, and can happen in some other ways. Anglo conformity, the assimilation ideology dominant until the recent past in the U.S., can be an example; though not related to colonization, this forced immigrants to speak Anglo Saxon's language, English, and follow Anglo norms and values, such as individuality (as opposed to collectivity), self-assertion (as opposed to harmony), and so forth.

Ethnocentrism does not necessarily yield bitter conflicts. Being able to love one's own group is psychologically healthy. If a boy says, for example, "I don't respect my family," there may be some psychologically unhealthy issues in his family. Hence, his parents should say to this boy, "What's the matter? Let's sit and talk."

The same thing can be also said about the nation. Some NFL players began kneeling during the national anthem in 2016, for example, in protest against its alleged racist content. In reaction to this, instead of caring about this protest, the U.S. president fiercely screamed, "Get that son of a bitch [the NFL players] off the field right now!"

NFL Players Protesting National Anthem

Photo courtesy of ShadowProof.com

As the kneeling controversy was spreading nationwide, the NFL league introduced a new policy mandating players and team personnel to either stand for the pregame playing of the anthem or remain in the locker room. Okay, but was this it?

Not so fast. In September, 2018, a major sports apparel company, Nike, decided to use Colin Kaepernick, the former NFL quarterback who started the kneeling protest, for its "Just Do It" campaign as its face. The controversy is going up in frames, anew...

Culture Shock
Ethnocentrism can be so strong that when confronted with a totally different culture, one may experience disorientation and suffer from one's own social identity shaken up. This social psychological phenomenon is called **culture shock**. The aforementioned Europeans who migrated from their small folk villages to urban areas, for example, must have heavily experienced this. Similarly today, the first generation of immigrants may face culture shock as things and actions, normal/valuable in their sending societies, may not be so at all in their host societies.

Cultural Relativism

According to anthropologist Diane Lews (1973), anthropology emerged along with the expansion of Europe and the colonization of the non-Western world (p. 582). Although its literal meaning is "the study of humans," it started as the study of, in reality, non-Europeans, or the colonized. As Europeans studied non-Europeans in their own views, anthropological reports back then could hardly be free from ethnocentric biases, always ranking non-European cultures below their own.

Anthropologist Franz Boas (1931 [1911]) criticized this ethnocentric tendency of anthropological reports in his era, softly suggesting that:

- It is somewhat difficult for us to recognize that the value which we attribute to our own civilization is due to the fact that we participate in this civilization...; but it is certainly conceivable that there may be other civilizations, based perhaps on different traditions and on a different equilibrium of emotion and reason which are of *no less value than ours,* although it may be impossible for us to appreciate their values without having grown up under their influence. (Boas 1931 [1911], p. 225; emphasis added)

His students, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, among others, based upon Boas's suggestion, led the newer generation of anthropology, and their basic attitudes toward culture known as **cultural relativism** became a dominant view among social scientists in the early 20th century. They maintain that cultures are relative, and that there's no absolute standard by which cultures can be ranked one over/under another. For example, one speaks French and the other, Chinese. Which is superior/inferior? The answer is: Neither. Cultural relativism, thus, supports the idea of "diversity" or multiculturalism.

Its Discontent

Recently, however, some have begun arguing against this view. Anthropologist Robert Edgerton (1992), for example, contends in his *Sick Societies* that if a culture maintains customs harmful to its people, especially weak ones (e.g., cannibalism, torture, infanticide, female circumcision, ceremonial rape, and so forth), we should not play with the idea of "relativism." It's not relative, but *absolutely* bad.

Social Changes

Cultural Lag
Social changes occur often rapidly, but people's mentality tends to have difficulty in catching up with them. This gap between social changes and people's unchanging mentality is called **cultural lag**. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that the Constitution guarantees a right to same sex marriage. This means that any laws or actions that can hinder this right to same sex marriage are considered illegal. This is a big social change. But is people's mentality toward same sex marriage smoothly changing in this direction? If not, that's cultural lag.

When the topic is about "cultural lag," some scholars exclusively (and *erroneously*) focus on the gap between culture and technological innovations (see, e.g., yourdictionary.com, wikipedia.org, etc.), but same-sex marriage is not a technological innovation, is it? What causes the confusion? William F. Ogburn, who coined the term "cultural lag," described this common societal phenomenon this way:

> The various parts of modern culture are not changing at the same rate, some parts are changing much more rapidly than others; and that since there is a correlation and interdependence of parts, a rapid change in one part of our culture requires readjustments through other changes in the various correlated parts of culture. ... Where one part of culture changes first, *through some discovery or invention*, and occasions changes in some part of culture dependent upon it, there frequently is a delay in the changes occasioned in the dependent part of culture. (Ogburn 1922, pp. 200-1; emphasis added).

As emphasized above, Ogburn wrote "through some discovery or invention." This could mean, for sure, technological innovations but, ah-hah, is not necessarily limited to be so. It could be a new discovery of "marriage equality" for same-sex couples by the supreme court, behind which some people's old mentality seems to lag.

Cultural Diffusion
Unlike culture shock or cultural lag, **cultural diffusion** can be fun. It's about social changes through "mutual assimilation" or copying each other

in diverse societies. In New York, we can observe a plenty of examples. Some non-Asian people, for example, have tattoos in Chinese characters-- whose meaning they may not clearly understand, though. Think about food, as well. American food today, according to Americans, includes French fries, pizza, California role, Hamburger with Swiss cheese… Are these actually American? Really?

Summary

A culture consists of many elements, such as norms and values. It is important to note that they vary across societies and change over time. Thus, cultural lag is happening all the time, everywhere. In diverse societies observed is cultural diffusion, social changes that involve two or more different cultures.

Further Research

The science-fiction novel, *Babel-17*, by Samuel R. Delaney was based upon the principles of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Read an excerpt from the novel here: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Babel-17

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Glossary

beliefs
> tenets or convictions that people hold to be true

folkways
> direct, appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of a culture

formal norms
> established, written rules

ideal culture
> the standards a society would like to embrace and live up to

informal norms
> casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to

language
> a symbolic system of communication

mores
> the moral views and principles of a group

norms
> the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured

real culture
> the way society really is based on what actually occurs and exists

sanctions
> a way to authorize or formally disapprove of certain behaviors

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
   the way that people understand the world based on their form of
   language

social control
   a way to encourage conformity to cultural norms

symbols
   gestures or objects that have meanings associated with them that are
   recognized by people who share a culture

values
   a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society

Theoretical Perspectives on Culture

- Discuss the major theoretical approaches to cultural interpretation

Music, fashion, technology, and values—all are products of culture. But what do they mean? How do sociologists perceive and interpret culture based on these material and nonmaterial items? Let's finish our analysis of culture by reviewing them in the context of three theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalists view society as a system in which all parts work—or function—together to create society as a whole. In this way, societies need culture to exist. Cultural norms function to support the fluid operation of society, and cultural values guide people in making choices. Just as members of a society work together to fulfill a society's needs, culture exists to meet its members' basic needs.

Functionalists also study culture in terms of values. Education is an important concept in the United States because it is valued. The culture of education—including material culture such as classrooms, textbooks, libraries, dormitories—supports the emphasis placed on the value of educating a society's members.

This statue of Superman stands in the center of Metropolis, Illinois. His pedestal reads "Truth—Justice—The American Way." How would a

functionalist interpret this statue? What does it reveal about the values of American culture? (Photo courtesy of David Wilson/flickr)

Conflict theorists view social structure as inherently unequal, based on power differentials related to issues like class, gender, race, and age. For a conflict theorist, culture is seen as reinforcing issues of "privilege" for certain groups based upon race, sex, class, and so on. Women strive for equality in a male-dominated society. Senior citizens struggle to protect their rights, their health care, and their independence from a younger generation of lawmakers. Advocacy groups such as the ACLU work to protect the rights of all races and ethnicities in the United States.

Inequalities exist within a culture's value system. Therefore, a society's cultural norms benefit some people but hurt others. Some norms, formal and informal, are practiced at the expense of others. Women were not allowed to vote in the United States until 1920. Gay and lesbian couples have been denied the right to marry in some states. Racism and bigotry are very much alive today. Although cultural diversity is supposedly valued in the United States, many people still frown upon interracial marriages. Same-sex marriages are banned in most states, and polygamy—common in some cultures—is unthinkable to most Americans.

At the core of conflict theory is the effect of economic production and materialism: dependence on technology in rich nations versus a lack of technology and education in poor nations. Conflict theorists believe that a society's system of material production has an effect on the rest of culture. People who have less power also have less ability to adapt to cultural change. This view contrasts with the perspective of functionalism. In the U.S. culture of capitalism, to illustrate, we continue to strive toward the promise of the American dream, which perpetuates the belief that the wealthy deserve their privileges.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that is most concerned with the face-to-face interactions between members of society. Interactionists see culture as being created and maintained by the ways people interact and in how individuals interpret each other's actions. Proponents of this theory conceptualize human interactions as a continuous process of deriving meaning from both objects in the environment and the actions of others. This is where the term symbolic comes into play. Every object and action has a symbolic meaning, and language serves as a means for people to represent and communicate their interpretations of these meanings to others. Those who believe in symbolic interactionism perceive culture as highly dynamic and fluid, as it is dependent on how meaning is interpreted and how individuals interact when conveying these meanings.

We began this chapter by asking what culture is. Culture is comprised of all the practices, beliefs, and behaviors of a society. Because culture is learned, it includes how people think and express themselves. While we may like to consider ourselves individuals, we must acknowledge the impact of culture; we inherit thought language that shapes our perceptions and patterned behavior, including about issues of family and friends, and faith and politics.

To an extent, culture is a social comfort. After all, sharing a similar culture with others is precisely what defines societies. Nations would not exist if people did not coexist culturally. There could be no societies if people did not share heritage and language, and civilization would cease to function if people did not agree on similar values and systems of social control. Culture is preserved through transmission from one generation to the next, but it also evolves through processes of innovation, discovery, and cultural diffusion. We may be restricted by the confines of our own culture, but as humans we have the ability to question values and make conscious decisions. No better evidence of this freedom exists than the amount of cultural diversity within our own society and around the world. The more we study another culture, the better we become at understanding our own.

This child's clothing may be culturally specific, but her facial expression is universal. (Photo courtesy of Beth Rankin/flickr)

Summary

There are three major theoretical approaches toward the interpretation of culture. A functionalist perspective acknowledges that there are many parts of culture that work together as a system to fulfill society's needs. Functionalists view culture as a reflection of society's values. Conflict theorists see culture as inherently unequal, based upon factors like gender, class, race, and age. An interactionist is primarily interested in culture as experienced in the daily interactions between individuals and the symbols that comprise a culture. Various cultural and sociological occurrences can be explained by these theories; however, there is no one "right" view through which to understand culture.